

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
OF CHINA. PAMPHLET No. 2.

**THE UNIVERSALITY OF
CHRISTIANITY.**

BY

Rev. LLEWELYN D. BEVAN, D.D.

Shanghai :

PRINTED AT THE SHANGHAI MERCURY, LIMITED.

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An address given by Rev. Llewelyn D. Bevan, D.D., of Adelaide, Australia, at the International Institute, Shanghai, China, Friday, 5th December, 1912.

The most striking, the most unchanging fact in regard to humanity is Religion. Men's forms, colour, faces, languages are varied, differing; their customs, modes of life, organizations and governments are of many and totally unlike kinds. But everywhere man is religious. The cases in which it has been asserted that some races have no religion have turned out to be errors and misunderstandings on the part of the travelling inquirer. We may say all men worship. Religion is the belief that in the world around us there is some Power which possesses qualities like those which we possess, and to which man is related, and on which man depends, and with which it is of supreme importance that we should come into relationships of knowledge, communication and unity. As an object of knowledge this unseen Being rises from the lowest thought of the most debased peoples to the noblest aspiration, and poesis, and worship of the most advanced and cultivated sage or prophet or saint. The expression of honour and adoration of such a Being includes the wildest and grossest rites of the cannibal, and the purest and most ideal contemplative adoration of the most holy and refined, and the fellowship between man and the Infinite Spirit of the Universe rises from the apparently puerile and unmeaning magic of the savage, to the rapture of the highest mystic and the sweet communion of the trusting human child with the Divine father, in the purest, simplest exercises of the most advanced faith.

This widespread religiousness of mankind has gathered itself into those associations and systems which we term the religions of the world; some of them the growths of a general thought and faith evolved and deve-

loped among certain peoples, and some the teaching and influence of individual men of peculiar and outstanding qualities, who have given to their fellows a special faith and a distinctive worship of God.

The relation of these religions to one another has been very varied. For centuries and milleniums they have been distinct and separate, with nothing in common in their constitution and in their histories, never touching one another, but separate and remote. In other cases they have the relationship of common origin, or one has been developed from an older and more original faith. Sometimes in the history of mankind these religions have come into conflict, and the most desperate contests that mankind has experienced have arisen between the nations and races which hold these diverse Faiths.

These varying relationships have arisen from conditions of man's course in the separate parts of the world and in the great human divisions, but in some cases they have sprung from the peculiar nature of the religious systems themselves, the claims which they make for recognition and acceptance; in some cases their very essence being exclusive, aggressive, full of claim and combat.

In modern times a remarkable change has come over these varied relationships of the religions of the world. A movement partly scientific and partly ethical has led men of varied faiths to look upon one another in a different spirit from that of the old and often contentious past. Human intercourse has softened human manners. Knowledge of the past and especially knowledge of the opinions and convictions of other men have combined to create a patient, a sympathetic, an inquiring spirit; out of all this has arisen the new science of religions, as it has been called, with the result that the spirit of antagonism has largely passed away. The scientific quest of unity has led to the raising of the problem as to how far there may not be found an underlying agreement which will bring a certain friendliness into the intercourse of faiths, perhaps a combining in many creeds as to certain original and essential universals, or it may be the recognition of the possibility that each faith is only one of the converging radii which meet in a centre

that shall include all and be the final union of humanity in its union with the Eternal Spirit which will be man's final blessedness, the glory and perfection of the whole universe of God.

I think it must be acknowledged, and it is only fair that this should be freely and generously done, that the most efficient workers in this great business of the unifying of man, especially in his brotherhood in religion, is greatly owing to the labours of those who have come out into these foreign lands and have toiled both in missionary and other fields of intellectual and spiritual labour. I can remember in very early days how my attention was arrested by the remarks of a missionary visiting my college, who referred to some of those teachings of an ancient non-Christian sage which were not greatly to be distinguished from those of Christ. Mr. Maurice in his book on the "Conflict of Religion in modern times," thrown out in the form of letters to a missionary, refers to what seemed in those days to be a very advanced and almost dangerous theory that it might be well for the worker in foreign lands and amid an alien religion, to inquire whether there was not much in those so-called heathen doctrines that was really Christian and might be used as a ground on which to establish the claims of the new faith that was to be propagated. Such a teaching was vastly different from that which had marked and inspired Christian missions, but is an example of the far-reaching vision of one who has come to be regarded as a modern prophet by some schools of the Church.

It is not to be wondered at that the study of the comparative relations of various Faiths has grown apace in our time. Persecution has to a large extent disappeared from the Christian Church. We are recovering, thank God, from that terrible decay of true Christianity which for centuries has limited the real spiritual power of the Church and turned men away from the great reasonableness and tender humanity of the prophet of Nazareth. But the light is breaking, the day is growing. This institution is one of the children of the light. May its work continue and increase.

As we look at the great religions of the world I suppose the most obvious features belonging to all of them and to each in its particular form is that they stand for some particular truth, that each is marked by a special quality, which has dominated

its thinking, and in a large manner has determined the expression of it in outward form and even in its secular history and influence.

It is manifestly impossible for me to even present a resume of these specific features of the religions of the world. I may however call your attention to a few facts as an illustration of the argument I propose to raise. For example Brahmanism is emphatically a religion of the spiritual world and the dominant feature in it is the faith in spirit, with the corresponding intellectual principle that spirit is the only substance. It is thus that the phenomena of the universe are brought into unity. Spirit is real and the only reality is spirit. So intensely does the philosophic Brahman hold this that he denies reality to the objective world. It is not Being. It is a vain illusive show. Hence its worship, contemplation and adoration. Certainly it had its external development which became idolatry and polytheistic. Thus there was the reaction from excessive spiritism. But these external conditions were not the essence. They were the means of popularising and simplifying to the minds of men the deep speculations that lie at the heart of the faith, to be purged out and cast away, if the religion is to make any contribution to the universal, real, and final faith of man. I cannot stop to show how sublime becomes the thought of some of the votaries of this faith, when they cease from its errors and corruption, to take the profound central truths and make them a vast-reaching faith. But one must greet as common scns of the Infinite Father the men who formed the Brahmo Somaj movement.

What shall we say of Buddhism? He would be a very courageous man who should attempt to put into a dozen lines of a paper a compendium of all that passes under the name of Buddhism, for it is a Philosophy, a criticism, a vast collection of rites, an endless system of rules and observance. If we said it has a religion, numberless men would cry out that it is a denial of Religion, for it is in the final reduction atheistic. If we said it was an ethic, some one would declare that it excluded the conception of the struggle between right and wrong, and hence escaped from a law of righteousness; and so through all other endeavours to characterize

Buddhism. Perhaps its most characteristic principle is the recognition of obedience to natural law. "Find the universal law; obey it"; thus the soul—the series of subjective phenomena, of which the Ego, the Soul, the Self, is merely the series, becomes harmonious with nature, with the world. Thus man enters into the unity and harmony of the universe; man becomes divine.

Mohammedanism has its own clear and distinct principle. It is the principle of monotheism; God is one and the sole object of worship. He is sovereign. His law is as absolute, certain, unconditioned as fate. There is only one form of divine service and that is final submission to the will of God. Judaism like Mohammedanism is emphatically monotheistic, with the personality of God most clearly declared and efficient through all the thinking of the religion. He is the Sovereign Lord of the world which he has created and sustains. The ethical teaching of Judaism is clear and direct. The commandments of God are definite, and the end of the law is a righteousness that is pleasing to God and includes men in its just operation.

Such are some of the leading principles of life and thought embodied especially in the religious faith of different races. I might apply a similar generalization to other religions both of the ancient and modern world. But this will be different from the purposes of our intent to-day. These central truths, or motives of religion, as we may call them, have sometimes contributed, though not always, to the relation which a Faith bears to the other Faiths of men. In many cases, indeed I think it may be said that in all cases, there is much more in the objective history of the religion than merely the central general principle to which we have referred. Indeed, many even of the adherents of a particular Faith might at first sight question and even combat our conception of the central principle of their religion, its expression and manifestation not exhibiting the principle and sometimes even disobeying it. But a careful examination of the history and experience of the Faith in its world course, its sometime decay and renewal, corruption, and its reformation, will bring to light the permanence of the central truth, the undying vigour of its ultimate truth. It is on this that the

religion has depended for its life and continued existence. It was the disappearance of the truth as at least an object of Faith which accounts for the death of some of the ancient religions of the world, or their absorption into other Faiths more true to themselves and loyal to their essential character.

Now I have no doubt that some of my hearers have observed that I have made no reference to Christianity as furnishing an illustration of what I have affirmed. This is because I hold, and I wish to bring my discussion to that point, that Christianity, properly understood, includes in its essence these great central principles of other Faiths and therefore I regard it as the end to which these Faiths will come. It is impossible to take any one principle and make that the essence of Christianity. The history of Christian thought has illustrated again and again the futility of basing the religion of Jesus upon one great principle. The Gods of all Faiths are found, sought after, and attained in the Christian Faith. It ever amplifies and enlarges the sphere of its significance. The attempt to fasten it to some credal forms has failed again and again in the history of the Christian Church. It refuses to be included even in the largest body of doctrine, or the most organised institutions, or the most splendid and impressive of religious rites and sacraments. The teaching of Nazareth's prophet is wider than the largest of speculations. His life is more searching, more authoritative, than even the amplest interpretation of His words. His consummate act of sacrifice, and His triumph alike in the natural and the spiritual world, have impressed even the experience of the most advanced of His followers and people, and the world awaits with an ever-increasing sense of the greatness of the Christ, the manifestation of His person and kingdom, not merely to the world, but to all the universe. It is quite possible that some of you will say, "Ah! that is a dream, it is nothing but a hallucination." But the wonder, the miracle, still remains; whence came the dream? Why does the course of history, with absolute and unbroken purpose, only move along this line of transcendent advance of ever-widening inclusiveness?

It is one of the glad inheritances of this age of ours that I can put forward such a claim for Christ in the most

friendly and brotherly spirit towards the other great faiths of the world. I know that once this belief would have been asserted and pressed at the point of the sword and with the logic of the stake. Even now some who agree with me in the claim of the Master affirm it as an antagonism to alien beliefs and with the shadow of condemnation behind the offers of mercy. But that is not my spirit. I do not think it is the spirit of my Lord, as some incidents in the lowly and initial stages of His mission will illustrate. The teaching of the great interpreter of Christ's mission, the apostle to the Gentiles (which really means the apostle to universal men), declared that his own native religion was a child-leader to bring men to Christ, the supreme and ultimate teacher of the soul, and its Saviour. And he said this in complete friendliness to the Judaism which he had left for the wider faith. He still observed, if necessary, some of its rites, and remained proud of the fact that he belonged to that older faith, though he had passed to its perfected and enlarged form.

I have left myself but short space to refer to those elements in Christianity which are the sum and outcome, and, if I may coin a word, the overspread of the faiths of mankind. Let me indicate them by no more than a mention.

In the first place Christianity affirms the being and action of the Supreme and Infinite One, in terms which include, and for the most part transcend, the highest achievement of the human mind both in speculative and mystical apprehension of God. Jesus uses, and has made usual for universal man, one conception of God which is the most inclusive—the most forceful. To Him God is always Father. He defined the divine nature once in simple conversation with a woman at her daily common toil. "God is spirit," he said and then gave us the highest generalization of the mind without leaving the region of the human also, in the one word, "Father," indeed dimly searched after in many a faith, but made universal, essential, operative, only through Christ. "My Father," "Your Father," "Our Father," all philosophy, all true science is there. The last word of material investigators into the nature of the universe and life has not gone beyond the tremendous sweep of divine fatherhood and all that it implies. Here is the foundation of

the all-embracing faith, for, remember, religion is not only for the seer, the prophet, the theologian, the philosopher, it is for the common men, the poorest who toils for his daily bread, for the broken-hearted mother that sees the grave close over her only child, nay, for the outcast of your street, for the virgin mother whom you deify, and for the thief that died upon the cross at the Master's side.

But in Christianity there is also the principle which is expressed in Incarnation, and illustrated and conserved, and made dynamical, in the sacrifice of God-in-Christ at Calvary. It would take a volume to expound this truth. But it is so simple, so clear, so universally applicable, that a child might understand it. The unity of God and His universe is one of the initial and fundamental truths which express facts equally initial and fundamental. The creation of the world by God expresses the general fact of the relation of the universe to God and is perfectly consistent with that conception of the divine and the created which is declared by some religions as Emanation, by a large-eyed science as evolution, and is crowned by the appearance of personality, with consciousness and law, which we know in ourselves, and beyond which we can never climb by the mightiest effort of Reason or imagination. Now together with this fact there comes the shadow and catastrophe of what we call Sin, which is really separation from God. The most extensive speculation cannot get beyond the dread dark actuality of sin. The speculative problem now becomes a practical one. Every religion seeks to solve it. Can we escape this separation from God? Can we recover our unity with God? To this the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the answer of Divine grace and mercy. Man and God are one in the child of Bethlehem. Can anything break the union? "Not life," is the answer of the Holy man of God. "Not death, not God Himself," who appeared to abandon the dying one, who would not be severed from the Eternal, but claimed Him as still His own, in His cry, "my God, my God," and who as human died, not into severance and loss, but into the heart of God Himself. This was victory. This was redemption. This was the conquest of man's and God's antagonist, of death. This was the reconstructed earth, the new-established heaven. What a message

this is for the world? Do you wonder at the inspiration, the exalting voices of the men who went forth to declare this gospel to mankind? Ah! friends, how the theologian, the priest, the ecclesiastic, got hold of this great, joyous teaching, and buried it in the greed and ambition of men! They have well-nigh involved mankind in a second fall. But against this blessed truth, which every religion in the world will grant, when it sees it simply and plainly, the gates of hell cannot prevail.

But man is not only a religious being, that is related to the unseen world. He is a denizen of this world. He is man with relations to man as well as to God. He is governed by law; he is met by duty. Has Christianity any message for mankind on this area of its being? It has, indeed! So much so, that not few of the expounders of Christianity have reduced it almost entirely to a moral system of rules of life, ignoring very largely the spiritual and personal element which in its subjective character and history gives to Christianity its special and almost unique character.

The founder of Christianity has been regarded ever as presenting a high ideal of virtue and devotion. Even the Jew, who for centuries has considered Jesus to have been a deceiver and misleader of the people, is laying aside his hostility, and frequently gives to Him a high place for virtue and righteousness. How full of wisdom, of light, and inspiration, are the words of Jesus! This is recognized by all the world. Man may refuse to Him the claim which Christians make that He is a Saviour and Lord in a peculiar and unique sense, but they are everywhere acknowledging His wonderful wisdom, and the wide sweep of His doctrine and law. It is this universal applicability of Christ's ethic which renders Him in this direction a world-teacher. Every position in life He has treated. Every relationship He has defined, and explored its claims. His teaching is that of the universal, because it was of the common life. Himself a mechanic He begins to be cited as a social leader in the most modern and progressive circles of reform. From childhood to full age, from the school to the gibbet, at the marriage banquet, and the funeral, in the place of worship, at the court of law, Jesus not only has His teaching, but He

gave the example of life's conduct: Christian morality has no climate, no race, no condition, no estate. It is simple, practical, direct, universal. It is not the definition of the pedant, nor the wire pulling of the scribe. It is human life, everywhere and at all times, directed, guided, inspired.

That last word "inspired" suggests the next point to which I allude and the last to which I can refer with anything but mention. What I have referred to might be called the spectacular, or the doctrinal, or the philosophic, aspects of Christianity which are of universal appeal to mankind. But it must not be forgotten that all these aspects of Christ's person and teaching are made forceful according to Christian faith by a direct and personal relation of Christ to every human being. All that He was and did and suffered, He was and did and suffered for mankind, for men, for every man. We cannot discuss this or its truth now. But let it be granted as a fact, then does not it at once render Christianity the place of the universal Religion? This is really what all the faiths are seeking. It is that which every man needs. It is for the most degraded outcast; it is equally for the most exalted, the most pure and excellent of human kind. Remember, Christianity does not bring the wonderful gift by compulsion. It is an offer. It asks for the clearest light to shine upon it. It says to men, "Make trial of it. Keep your liberty, exercise your reason, use your will." The humblest, meekest of the sons of woman, makes the most magnificent, the most mighty, the most divine, promise that man has ever known, has ever dreamed. If it be not a truth, whence has it come? Tell me, if Jesus is not what He declared Himself to be, who invented Him? He who gave Jesus to the world must be a God, and the wisest, mightiest, most loving of all the heroes—I must worship Him!

Many other are the features which we find in Christianity which renders it germane to man, to all men. Its history is remarkable. There are limitations placed by Christians themselves on its world-wide application. The very reformed church has narrowed the Gospel by its definitions and creed. Nationalism, racial separations, even the modern propagandists, are ever in danger of dehumanizing the very faith

which they declare; and yet the religion of Jesus blossoms, the man of Nazareth becomes more human, more divine, every day as His sublime form rises higher and clearer before the eye of men, and seems to promise to fill the world. Need I refer to the universal application of Christianity to sex, to age, to condition, to differences and grades of life, to colour, to race. I think of it as it finds itself in different languages, in varying civilizations. I will not refer to its tremendous power, not as a political engine, but simply as a moral and spiritual force, in the later life of the world, nay, in the life of all mankind to-day. I make no contrasts. I suggest no differences. I regard merely its friendliness to all men, to all faiths. Like the sun, it shines on every land. Like the air, it breathes over all the earth. Like the ocean, it laves every shore. The most wonderful fact in human history you may see illustrated in a single window of one institution in a London street. It is a single sentence of the Christian master. It is in all the great languages of the world, and in hundreds of less important tongues of the human race. What is the sentence? One alone, culled from that garden of man's speech, the Christian's Bible: "God so loved the world, that He gave his only Begotten Son, that whoseover believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

